The Melville Society NEWSLETTER

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Melville is one of several important American literary men whose names are not yet enrolled in the Hall of Fame, a memorial shrine for great Americans which is maintained at New York University. Anyone may nominate non-living Americans for this honor, and each year the names of those nominated are submitted to a committee which represents all parts of the nation. Nominees who receive a sufficient number of the committee's votes are admitted to the Hall of Fame. Others remain on the nominating list for the next year.

Melville's name has been on the list for some years, but (along with Thoreau and others) he has never mustered the required number of votes. His original nomination, incidentally, was presented by members of the Society several years ago.

It is permissible to send pertinent information about nominees to the curator of the Hall of Fame at any time. Persons wishing to urge Melville's election may communicate with Mrs. Bertha L. Lyon, Curator, Hall of Fame, New York University, 53 Washington Square South, New York 12, N.Y.

NOTES

William Braswell is a Fulbright professor at the University of Athens, where one of his lectures last fall was on the subject of "Herman Melville and the Problem of Evil." He reports that no Greek translation of *Moby-Dick* seems to be available but that plans are under consideration for a translation to be underwritten by the American government.

The first number of a *Walt Whitman Newsletter* was published in January under the editorship of Gay Wilson Allen. Copies may be secured by writing to the New York University Press, Washington Square, New York 3, N.Y.

Miss Myrna Neal is doing a brief study of "Melville and the Theater" under the direction of Professor H. Howard Hughes at Texas Wesleyan College.

Robert G. Newman, librarian of the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield (Mass.), has proposed the issuance by the Post Office Department of a commemorative stamp honoring Melville. He finds that stamps have been issued in the past in honor of Irving, Cooper, Emerson, Alcott, Clemens ("authors" set of 1940); Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Whitman, Riley ("poets" set of 1940); William Allen White, Joel Chandler Harris, and Poe. Newman has secured the cooperation of the Pittsfield postmaster and of the Berkshire Stamp Club. He asks for the endorsement of the Society, and the matter has been referred to the executive committee.

Recently published: *The Confidence-Man*, edited by Elizabeth S. Foster, (New York: Hendricks House), $4.00. This is reported as the sixth edition of the work in English.

Yankee Whalers in the South Seas by A. B. C. Whipple (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1954) has two chapters dealing with Melville and *Moby-Dick*.

The American Academy of Arts and Letters has issued a catalogue of its exhibition, held in New York City during December, of *The Great Decade in American Writings*: 1850-1860. Included in the exhibition were books and manuscripts of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman.

Cultural influence: The St. Louis (Mo.) zoo is said to own a 2,500-pound sea elephant named (perhaps inappropriately) Moby Dick.

William Braswell sends from Athens information to the effect that a radio dramatization of Melville's "Bartleby" was presented in that city on Thursday evening, January 20. The dramatization (including translation into Greek) was prepared by Minos Volanakis, and Charles Koun served as producer and director. This was one of a series of American works presented on the "National Program."

Pond's Theater presented *Billy Budd* on the ABC-TV network Thursday evening, March 10.

Query: Can anyone supply information (other than what is found in Melville and in his immediate source-book) about the life and authenticity of Israel R. Potter? Reported a native of Cranston, R. I. (born August 1, 1744), he is supposed to be buried in his native city. So far as is known, his grave has never been discovered, and no indisputable records of his life remain. If he actually lived, the location of his grave and of other records in Cranston may be possible. On the other hand, (to use a Melvillean pun) he may be buried in some potter's field.

Anyone interested in Melville and his works is eligible to become a member of the Society. The secretary will be happy to send a description of the Society

and a sample copy of the Newsletter to anyone whose name is proposed by a present member.

HUSTON'S MOBY DICK

Gil Wilson, honorary member of the Society and a well-known artist who has made 300 drawings based on *Moby-Dick*, will visit schools and colleges throughout the United States to discuss the book and show color slides of his work. This will serve to prepare American audiences for the forthcoming release (probably in November) of John Huston's motion picture production, *Moby-Dick*, starring Gregory Peck. Those who may be interested in securing a place on the schedule of Mr. Wilson's tour should communicate with him at 245 East 36th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

The Huston picture has been fortunate in receiving more advance publicity than almost any other film of recent years. While a substantial portion of this publicity came as the result of good work by public relations men, much of it undoubtedly was aroused spontaneously and grew out of a natural interest of Americans in the romance of whaling and in Melville's whaling epic. Most of the scenes in this picture were photographed in the Atlantic Ocean off the Azores and off the coast of Ireland. The village of Youghal (you-all), Ireland, was transformed into the New Bedford of a century ago, and many of the townspeople were employed as actors in the film. Gregory Peck acquired a rather odd-looking ivory leg (see the cover of *Collier's* for March 4, 1955) probably designed in imitation of the stylized Rockwell Kent illustrations. Newspaper columnists and radio and television commentators followed nearly every step in the filming of the picture with avid interest and reported its progress to enchanted audiences. Obviously the picture will have to be remarkable, indeed, if it succeeds in living up to this favorable advance publicity.

From the very beginning Huston has insisted that the production was to be "pure Melville," and various authorities were consulted (including the secretary of the Society) for advice regarding the technical details and for criticism of the script (written by Ray Bradbury). The scriptwriter was instructed to prepare a screen play which would be as faithful to the novel as possible. He was even allowed to go so far in this direction as to refrain from inventing any women characters for the story.

Whether Huston actually succeeded in capturing the "pure essence of Melville" for the screen will have to be judged after the picture's release. Certainly there will be some technical errors in the production. Some of the publicity photographs, for example, show Ahab in the process of doing Moby Dick to death with a harpoon—hardly the proper instrument for such an undertaking. The harpoon was intended to fasten rather than to kill the whale. A crow's-nest, unknown in Ahab's day, will probably appear in the film. Ahab's false leg is apparently the wrong one (see the Newsletter for June, 1952, for an explanation of the reasons for believing that Ahab's ivory leg must have been his right one). Other technical matters might be mentioned; some errors were fortunately prevented by good advice from Melville scholars. As to the major interpretation of the plot, Huston has argued that very few scholars agree among themselves regarding its fundamental meaning and that his own version (based on his frequent reading of the book) will therefore be as authentic as any other. It is already clear that the spiritual conflicts of the novel will be minimized in the motion picture, but one may hope that the cutting room will leave something more than a vendetta between a man and a whale!

In designing a suitable *Pequod* for his production, Huston rebuilt an old sailing vessel to look like the *Charles W. Morgan*, only whaling ship of Melville's time still in existence. The musical score includes old New England sea songs, especially those mentioned by Melville.

Suggestions have been made that the Society take part in ceremonies attending the release of the picture, that members receive free tickets, etc., etc., but nothing definite has been achieved along these lines.

Meanwhile, a half-hour 35mm film in color, entitled *Herman Melville's Moby Dick*, is to be released in May by Jerry Winters of New York City. This is described as a kind of dramatic synthesis of some of the drawings of Gil Wilson. The score was written by Richard Mohaupt, and Thomas Mitchell is the narrator.

THE *Melville Society* NEWSLETTER IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY FOR MEMBERS OF THE Melville Society, a group of literary scholars and others interested in the life and works of Herman Melville. The Society seeks to facilitate the exchange of information among its members, to stimulate the study of Melville's life and works, and to encourage literary, historical, and bibliographical research. Membership is two dollars per year and includes all services of the Society. Associate membership (non-voting) is one dollar per year and includes all issues of the Newsletter. Address Tyrus Hillway, secretary, at Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.